

The Impending Catastrophe – a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe



According to the GPA, all parties recognised the centrality of the land question as a key driver towards a democratic resolution of the crisis in Zimbabwe. It not only contextualised the issue as the Zimbabweans perceived it but outlined a set of measures to be put in place in order for it to be resolved amicably.

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In 2001, South Africa, as mandated by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), assumed the role of mediator in the Zimbabwean crisis. By this time what can be argued to have been an economic crisis started in the late 1990s in Zimbabwe had become a serious political crisis. Since independence from colonial rule in 1980, the ruling party in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), had taken steps in economic and political management that were seen to be autocratic, economically destructive and curbing the freedoms of Zimbabweans.

The land reform programme which saw the removal of white farmers from the land and handling of elections drew criticism from European countries, individually and through the European Union (EU) and from the United States of America (USA). Consequently, these countries imposed

economic sanctions on Zimbabwe. The South African mediation role, through President Thabo Mbeki, ran from 2001 to 2008 when an agreement between the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and ZANU-PF was signed. Throughout this period the EU, USA and human rights organisations criticised South Africa's mediation efforts, the so-called quiet diplomacy, claiming that South Africa was protecting ZANU-PF and its ruler since 1980, President Robert Mugabe. However, it is argued in this article that South Africa's mediation role was in line with principle of self-determination and sovereignty, multilateralism and also the principle of 'African solutions to African problems'.

There is consensus in the literature that contextual factors consist of variables concerning firstly the dispute, secondly the contending parties and their relationships, thirdly the mediator, and finally the international context.

Of these four contextual factors the focus of this article will be on the mediator and the mediation process, involving mainly the strategies employed by the mediator and the responses of the parties concerned.

The crisis in Zimbabwe has been of keen interest for many scholars, for example Chris Alden, Mills Soko, Miriam Prys, Jack Spence, Chris Landsberg, Adam Habib and Merle Lipton. Many of these have aimed to demonstrate the lack of capacity South Africa has to influence and effect change within its region. The collapse of the Zimbabwean economy, continuous political violence and the failure of President Mbeki of South Africa to meet the international expectations in resolving the crisis, are sometimes used as examples to contest South Africa's leadership and regional hegemonic role.

The period 2000-2005 saw the most dramatic deterioration in Zimbabwe,

with freedom of the press being curbed, the imprisonment of political opponents, the arrest of trade unionists and large scale farm invasions. This culminated in a humanitarian crisis across the country. The main parties in this conflict were ZANU-PF, led by Robert Mugabe and the MDC, led by Morgan Tsvangirai. ZANU-PF, which was the governing party at the time, was accused of unleashing violence against citizens and especially those associated with the MDC. The approach by the South African government, led by Thabo Mbeki, has come to be characterised by many as “quiet diplomacy”:

Quiet diplomacy is defined as a combination of measures that include behind the scene engagements, secret negotiations, and subtle coaxing. (Dlamini 2001)

The mediation culminated in a global political agreement (GPA) which was signed in 2008. The main outcomes of the GPA were the formation of the government of national unity (GNU) which included power-sharing between ZANU-PF and the MDC in government and the drafting of a new constitution agreed on by both parties. The GNU ran its course between 2008 and 2013 when new elections were held and ZANU-PF was declared the victor. During this period a new Zimbabwean constitution was drafted and adopted before the 2013 elections. The focus of this article, however, is the period between 2001 and 2008 when Thabo Mbeki was the South African President and therefore the chief mediator.

Former President Mbeki captures this economic crisis, and maps this historic context of Zimbabwe since independence, as follows¹:

Zimbabwe's independence was in 1980. And quite correctly the government says that there are some urgent matters that we have to attend to: education, health, rural development. And indeed they spent huge resources addressing these matters, quite correctly. But the point we made there is that they did that and didn't pay sufficient attention to the fact that they didn't have enough resources to finance large social development programmes at that stage. So by 1983, three years

after independence, Zimbabwe already had an external debt which they couldn't manage, because they borrowed money to finance education and to finance health. And they couldn't pay in the end. So they then resorted to local borrowing; domestic debt ballooned – hence all the money comes into the coffers of the state, and you the factory owner, you want to borrow money, the banks are going to charge you 10 per cent interest. So we put all these things down; we said the objectives were very good and very important, but they didn't balance this thing. That is the beginning of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe and nothing to do with corruption or mismanagement or something. And the international financial institutions like the World Bank, they were quite happy to continue; they could see what was happening, that this country was over-borrowing, but they were quite happy to lend.

So the economic spending on developmental objectives which led to the country over-extending its debt was a major historical factor in the Zimbabwe crisis. Two additional challenges that directly led to the decline of the Zimbabwe economy were firstly the conflict in the Great Lakes region and secondly the subsequent decoupling of the South African and Zimbabwean economies. Each of these will be dealt with in turn a little later.

A fourth pivotal component informing the historic context of the crisis was the content of the Lancaster House Agreement. This included commitments relating to land redistribution. In order to settle the land reform question in Zimbabwe (as most arable land was owned and occupied by white farmers) the United Kingdom made certain financial commitments that would have seen this issue being addressed amicably. The fact that the UK government reneged on the terms of this agreement would ultimately be identified by some as the principal source of the crisis that persists in Zimbabwe.

There are contending narratives concerning the history of the crisis in Zimbabwe. One view which is clearly

dominant among Western countries focuses on the human rights abuses, political violence and instability in that country. In this account emphasis is placed on Mugabe the man, who is considered to have lost his way politically in Zimbabwe. A second narrative contests this, viewing these issues – including Mugabe's instability – as simply symptomatic of underlying causes. The causes underlying the symptoms are the focus of this predominantly Africanist narrative. From this perspective the crisis in Zimbabwe is not about the lunacy of Mugabe, but on the issue of land and land redistribution. As such this story involves more characters, and reflects deeply on the colonial and imperialist past: Britain (and its ally the United States) are the chief protagonists. The colonial past, Britain's obligations as outlined in the Lancaster House Agreement, their reneging on their pledges, and their interest together with their allies in the United States in “regime change” as a possible political solution to this crisis take centre stage.

The Zimbabwe crisis

This section presents a chronology of the events that took place in Zimbabwe from 1995 to 2008. (See table on the next two pages) It focuses in particular on the regional response to the growing problems in Zimbabwe, and South Africa's role in particular.

According to the GPA, all parties recognised the centrality of the land question as a key driver towards a democratic resolution of the crisis in Zimbabwe. It not only contextualised the issue as the Zimbabweans perceived it but outlined a set of measures to be put in place in order for it to be resolved amicably. Another key element informing the approach to the mediation process was with regards the equally important factor of a ‘regime change’ agenda of the UK and the USA.

The mediation process was besmirched with misconceptions fuelled by the media in the region and abroad. Some of these were the statement made by Mbeki that ‘there is no crisis’ in Zimbabwe; Mbeki holding Mugabe's hand on occasion in full view

TABLE 1: KEY EVENTS IN ZIMBABWE

DATE	KEY EVENT
1998	An economic crisis marked by high interest rates and inflation provokes riots and massive support for the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions headed by Morgan Tsvangirai
August 1998	Zimbabwe sent its troops into the DRC (Great Lakes Conflict). Zimbabwe is chair of SADC organ on defence
September 1998	Pledging conference convened by South Africa and involving the UK, IMF and World Bank relating to funding to resolve the land issue in Zimbabwe
1998–1999	The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is formed and Tsvangirai is appointed leader
2000	Mugabe gets a taste of electoral defeat when voters back the MDC and turn down a proposed constitutional amendment which would have given the president more power
2000	Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF goes on to win a parliamentary poll amid charges of fraud and vote-rigging made by the opposition
2000	Thousands of so-called "independence war veterans", backed by the government, seize white-owned farms, saying the land was illegally seized by white settlers
March 2001	Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (South Africa) Aziz Pahad has working visit with UK Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth, Brian Wilson, including discussion on Zimbabwe
2001	Zimbabwe government agrees to stop often violent land invasions in exchange for British funds to finance land reform. Mugabe later rejects criticism he has ignored the deal.
September 2001	President Mbeki and five other SADC regional Heads of State attended a two-day summit in Harare, aimed at resolving the conflict in Zimbabwe ²
September 2001	Abuja Agreement signed by Zimbabwe Foreign Minister Stan Madenge, and in return Britain agrees to honour commitment to pay £36 million pounds towards a land reform programme ³
2002	Mugabe wins six-year term in election pitting him against Tsvangirai. Observers condemn poll as flawed and unfair. Commonwealth suspends Zimbabwe.
2002	South Africa donates R93,5 million through the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to improve food security in Zimbabwe. The country furthermore donates R12 million to Zimbabwe to purchase vaccine/drugs to curb the spread of foot-and-mouth disease in Zimbabwe and the region. ⁴
March 2002	Commonwealth Chairpersons' Committee meeting and Commonwealth Observer Group Report on the elections in Zimbabwe. A need for reconciliation was identified. Presidents Mbeki and Obasanjo (Nigeria) are requested to promote a process of reconciliation between the two main political parties, ZANU-PF and the MDC. South Africa also relies on the SADC Ministerial Group on Zimbabwe to continue with their work in the context of existing SADC decisions, which in many instances coincide with those taken by the Commonwealth. ⁵
November 2002	The Joint Commission for Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Co-operation between South Africa and Zimbabwe is revived to strengthen bilateral relations. ⁶
December 2002	SADC restructuring, so that countries are no longer responsible for sectors, and rotating chairs are introduced. Zimbabwe is no longer chair of the organ of Politics, Defence and Security (a position it had held since 1986). ⁷
December 2002	Emmerson Mnangagwe – Mugabe's chosen successor appears on stage of ANC national conference in Stellenbosch
December 2003	Commonwealth summit in Nigeria. South Africa opposes Zimbabwe's continued suspension from the commonwealth. South Africa is accused of putting a spanner in the works; and it is nevertheless decided to continue Zimbabwe's suspension from the commonwealth indefinitely. ⁸
8-9 December 2003	ZANU-PF and ANC secret talks on an exit plan for Mugabe, but these are revealed by Tsvangirai who does not approve of "sanitising ZANU-PF". ⁹
May 2003	President Mbeki, President Obasanjo, President Muluzi (Malawi) engaged in effort to resolve Zimbabwe crisis. ¹⁰

DATE	KEY EVENT
2003	The IMF begins steps to expel Zimbabwe from the fund over dues unpaid since 2001. Commonwealth agrees at summit in Abuja to continue suspension, leading Mugabe to pull Zimbabwe out of the organisation.
July 2003	Bush-Mbeki talks in which Mbeki is identified by Bush as the “point-man”, in touch with the parties concerned in Zimbabwe ¹¹
January 2004	Bilateral discussions between South Africa and Germany and discussion includes Zimbabwe ¹²
February 2004	The EU renews sanctions against Mugabe and his inner circle
October 2004	The High Court acquits Tsvangirai of plotting to assassinate Mugabe and seize power, a ruling condemned by the government
October 2004	Zimbabwe government expels a COSATU delegation that arrives on a fact finding mission ¹³
2005	South Africa shifts approach on Zimbabwe from commonwealth position, to AU/SADC mandate: “South Africa continues to engage all the stakeholders in Zimbabwe to find ways and means to assist Zimbabweans in their endeavours to find a home-grown solution to their political challenges.” ¹⁴
January 2005	Another COSATU delegation sent to meet with Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions is expelled from Zimbabwe
April 2005	Zimbabwe celebrates 25 years of independence
31 March 2005	The ruling ZANU-PF wins the March parliamentary election, giving it the majority it needed to change the constitution
March 2005	South Africa sends the National Observer Mission to observe Zimbabwe’s sixth parliamentary elections. South African observers also participated in the SADC observer elections mission. Both election observer teams declared the Zimbabwean parliamentary elections credible and reflective of the will of the people of Zimbabwe. ¹⁵
July 2005	Deputy President Mlambo-Ngcuka (South Africa) met with President Robert Mugabe and his Deputy, Ms Joyce Mujuru, as part of ongoing talks between the two countries ¹⁶
May-July 2005	700 000 people lose their homes or livelihoods after a highly criticised Zimbabwe government blitz on urban slums
August 2005	Remaining charges against Tsvangirai for plotting to assassinate Mugabe are dropped
Nov 2005	Two agreements entered into between South Africa and Zimbabwe: - Memorandum of Understanding concerning the Secondment of the Air Force of Zimbabwe Personnel to the South African Department of Defence - Agreement for the Establishment of a Joint Commission on Defence and Security entered into between South Africa and Zimbabwe
April 2006	Zimbabwe's annual inflation rises above 1 000%
March 2007	Tsvangirai badly beaten after he attempts to attend a banned protest rally, spurring international condemnation of Mugabe's government
2007	Central bank raises its main lending rate to 800 percent from 650 percent on October 1 to fight inflation. The bank says it will launch a new currency soon to try to curtail a thriving foreign exchange black-market. ¹⁷
March 2007	Two-day extraordinary summit in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, in March 2007. The Heads of State and Government of the SADC mandate President Mbeki to spearhead the promotion of dialogue among political parties in Zimbabwe.
April 2007	Power sharing talks between MDC and Zanu PF mediated by Mbeki begin
May 2007	South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique agreed on sharing the tourism spin-offs of the 2010 FIFA World Cup™, through “border free” tourism packages ¹⁸
September 2008	The signing of the Global Political Agreement by all parties in Zimbabwe.

of international media; the so-called “struggle buddies syndrome”; and the long-standing relationship between the ANC and ZANU-PF. When asked for a response to these issues, Mbeki provided an answer to what he called these misconceptions:

No, you see, there were two approaches which were possible with regard to Zimbabwe. One was the approach we took: “Let the Zimbabweans resolve this question and we’ll facilitate that process.” The other approach, which people like Tony Blair and others were very attached to, was regime change. So you have these two things colliding. All the criticism of us, that’s all it has to do with, people are criticising us not for what we did but because we opposed regime change. And they will find all sorts of things – that we’ve got farms in Zimbabwe, and this and that, and my wife is a relative of Mrs Mugabe – and they are cooking up all sorts of stories, essentially because we said no to regime change, which is what they wanted.¹⁹

This reveals that Mbeki’s choices were not in fact the dichotomy of “quiet diplomacy” versus the apparent “megaphone diplomacy” advocated by the West. Rather he was considering soft power tactics and approaches instead of military intervention. With the possibility of military intervention for regime change in Zimbabwe in focus, the question arose whether Mbeki’s choice for soft power tactics was informed by the failed military interventions to enforce a change of regime in both Iraq and Afghanistan. When asked about this, President Mbeki said:

Even before that, I mean, just fundamentally, it’s something that we would oppose, that you can’t have the United Kingdom coming all the way down here in order to decide who should govern Zimbabwe. It’s wrong. You know, the British Chief of Staff, Chief of General Staff of the British armed forces, around 2002, that period – Lord Guthrie, he has said this publicly – I mean, we’ve known it because we had to deal with it, but he said it publicly that Blair put a lot of pressure

on him to put together a military plan for the physical overthrow of Mugabe in Zimbabwe. And he says: “I refused because it didn’t make sense”. That’s the time when we were under a lot of pressure from them, the British, Americans and the Canadians who were so determined, they wanted to base forces in South Africa to overthrow the government of Zimbabwe, and we said “No; never will you do that. No, no, no, no”. They said they had already appointed people and they will tell us when they were moving and they will put so and so in his place – and we say “No, no, no, this is not going to happen”. And they couldn’t do it without South Africa. In his book, the book that’s just been published, Tony Blair says that He says: “I wanted to physically overthrow

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Robert Mugabe, but I was stopped by the neighbours”. That’s how he puts it. The rest is just stories; all the things about being great buddies with Bob Mugabe from the struggle and this and that. It’s because essentially these forces wanted to overthrow the government of Zimbabwe and we stood in their way.²⁰

These were but some of the historic factors informing the mediation process and why South Africa took the posture it did.

Now that we have been presented with a brief yet insightful historic perspective, let me outline what my concerns are going forward.

My main concern is indeed the end game, in particular what will happen to a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe.

I contend that once Mugabe dies, the ruling party, ZANU-PF will split

into three dominant factions, that of Grace Mugabe, the Deputy President and a third group hoping to provide some conciliation between the warring two groups above. This split will cause a climate of uncertainty, opposition parties are going to want to provide much needed direction, much to the consternation of some in ZANU-PF. The economy is going to take a further tumble just for good measure. Protest action and social unrest will be the order of the day, demanding change now that the liberation leader is no more, further exacerbating the tension in Harare and further afield in Zimbabwe.

This I contend is when the military will step in and ‘save the day’ because with such uncertainty, a failing economy and violent protest action, someone will have to bring calmness and stop lawlessness in its tracks. I argue that by so doing the military will be satisfying two very critical elements for themselves. On the one hand they will be seen as the purveyors of peace, law and order (which will at this stage be much needed); and on the other hand, they will exempt themselves from possible criminal prosecution for having propped up the Mugabe reign of terror for much of the last 20 years. It would be a win-win situation for the Generals and their lieutenants as well as for the police services (who have been on a crusade of a reign of terror on citizens daily).

The response from the regional State structures such as SADC is usually nothing short of callous and hence I question to what extent the South African government is ready for the socio-economic and political consequences of a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. There will be a further influx of illegal immigrants, putting further strain on basic services in our metros and towns.

The political activism of both Zimbabweans and their South African counterparts in civil society structures are required now more than ever to have more co-ordinated mass actions before we reach this post-Mugabe period. The international community also needs to come to the party in regard to humanitarian assistance and the lifting of sanctions in order to stimulate the local economy.

The rent seeking behaviour of the security forces will continue unabated if we do not engage with them and find solutions, perhaps through training of how to better engage with communities and facilitate how we can reduce the trust deficit amongst all Zimbabweans.

Already just some months ago, the military grew impatient and yet another intervention was required by South Africans to quell the heightened tension in that country.

As per the argument around the veracity of the 'regime change' matter, it is reasonable to assume that indeed there was such a desire by the UK and the USA for such change since this was their preferred strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan at the very same time. I am reminded of one of our South African judges stating that the current Zimbabwe leaves much to be desired, when some want to sing the praises of Mbeki. Well, when looking at the said countries where regime change did take place, looking at them in 2017, there is also much left to be desired in countries such as Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Ivory Coast. In fact, I might even go as far as to say that the situation is far worse in those countries than is the case in modern day Zimbabwe.

The lesson we have learned from this entire debacle is if you mess with one of the most important cornerstones of the capitalist system, that of private property relations, you will be punished severely. Hoping for the western powers to resolve the Zimbabwean crisis will bear little fruit. We Africans must find solutions for our own challenges.

Conclusion

The net result of all these efforts by the Mbeki-led intervention saw the culmination of the GPA coming into being and accepted by all parties involved in the crisis. Mbeki's presidential term in government came to an end and the logical next step, facilitated by the Zuma administration, was for a free and fair general election date to be set and for the Zimbabwean people to go to the polls and cast their votes and indicate their preferred candidates and party. This election was fraudulent and certainly not free and

fair.

There are clearly contesting narratives and interpretations about South Africa's role. The regional responses are supportive of its engagement and Mbeki's role within it at the time in particular. This runs contrary to the domestic media response, actions of civil society organs in South Africa and interpretations from the West. It is too easy to make normative statements about the "best" possible outcome in the Zimbabwe crisis and, thus, about the failure of South African regional leadership. Interpretation depends on whether this is being viewed domestically, regionally or internationally and each grouping itself is not necessarily internally united. It is clear that there are different interpretations on the successes of quiet diplomacy, with questions raised about what could have been the outcomes of the alternative approach of regime change, which was seriously considered as an option by some. The failures of these military interventions in other parts of the globe heighten these concerns about what alternatives may have been possible.

There are at least three distinctive regional public goods provided by South Africa: solidarity against the West and domestic opponents, the prevention of political fallout in the southern African region, and SADC unity.

Firstly South Africa's quiet diplomacy/ soft power tactics not only provided a sense of regional unity and security against outsiders but also, and probably equally importantly, unity against domestic opponents that are perceived to be supported by the West.

Secondly, the approach of South Africa has helped to prevent a complete breakdown of Zimbabwe and the consequences thereof on the social and economic systems of its neighbours through increased illegal immigration. Among the other potential negative consequences of a more aggressive South African stance towards Zimbabwe would have been the destabilisation of uneasy racial relations. A spread of the Zimbabwean crisis would have also threatened to bring up unresolved land reform issues in some of the neighbouring states. By

keeping Zimbabwe economically alive and keeping Mugabe within the circle of the respected SADC leaders, these potential side effects have been at least temporary forestalled.

This then leads to the third public good and that is SADC unity.

When considering all the above domestic responses it becomes clear that even though there were contending narratives as to the manner in which South Africa pursued its overall objectives in this regard, a dominant narrative persists in the region. This narrative speaks to the fact that South Africa, it seems, had very few options as to the way in which to resolve the crisis in Zimbabwe; it had to adhere to the principle of the self determination of Africa, especially post-colonialism.

Looking at regional power hierarchies also tells us about the limitations and constraints of regional powers in the developing world in particular, as well as their continual need to straddle two worlds – the regional and the global.

Whether these measures in the contemporary setting will suffice – and more importantly whether they will stand the test if Mugabe should die tomorrow – is indeed the question that must haunt us all going into the immediate future.■

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